

CHAPTER 9

Ship Ceremonies

Navy tradition dictates that each ship constructed for the service be honored on four historic ceremonial occasions: keel-laying, christening (or launching), commissioning and decommissioning. Various directives pertaining to these events are issued periodically, and one should check with the senior Navy official (i.e., Fleet Commander, Type Commander, etc.) office for local guidance.

Questions often arise concerning the proper wording of invitations and the agenda for the ceremony. Fortunately, existing regulations do not predetermine the precise sequence of activities or establish inflexible protocol stipulations. Responsible officials are given a comfortable latitude to produce a ceremony distinctively Navy in heritage and significance, yet singular in its specific circumstances. The information imparted in this chapter is intended to represent not a rigid standard so much as a concept of what has been done in the past in order to provide a guide to what is traditional and appropriate for the situation.

KEEL-LAYING CEREMONY

The first milestone in the history of a ship is the generally simple ceremony that marks the laying of the keel. The invitation is issued by shipyard officials and the ceremony conducted by them. The builder may be the commander of a naval shipyard or the president of a private company.

Invitation. The following is an annotated sample of a typical and correctly worded invitation to a keel-laying ceremony:

The Commander, Charleston Naval Shipyard
requests the honor of your presence
upon the occasion of the
laying of the keel of the destroyer
NEVERSAIL¹
by the Honorable _____²
_____³
at the Charleston Naval Shipyard
on Tuesday, the tenth of August⁴
at half past twelve o'clock

¹ The ship's prospective name, without the designation USS, is indicated here, if known; otherwise her type and number are given, e.g., DD 2215.

² Indicate the name of the speaker. Use the title "Honorable" only when it is appropriate to the status of the speaker.

³ Show the title of the speaker, if any, e.g., The Secretary of the Navy.

⁴ Some officials with a view to the historic nature of the event choose to include the year. When used, it should appear on the line following the date, written as "two thousand and one."

Program. A sample program for a keel-laying ceremony with annotation as to participants is shown below:

National Anthem	
Invocation	<i>Chaplain</i>
Welcome and introduction of the principal speaker	<i>President of the Shipbuilding Company or Commander of the Naval Shipyard</i>
Address	<i>Principal speaker</i>
Authentication of the keel-laying	<i>Optional. If included, the principal guest, generally the speaker, will affix a name plate or inscribe his initials on the keel.</i>
Movement of the keel into position on the shipway	<i>Performed by workmen</i>
Announcement that the keel "has been truly and fairly laid"	<i>The Principal Speaker or the President of the Shipbuilding Company</i>
Benediction	<i>Chaplain</i>

LAUNCHING/CHRISTENING CEREMONY

In this second significant ceremony, the recently constructed ship is solemnly dedicated, named and committed to the sea. There are many variations in the launching programs, even as to whether it is known as a launching or christening or both. The desires of the shipbuilder and of the Navy as well as existing circumstances will determine its final form. It should be noted that the designation of U.S. Ship (USS) is not properly used with the ship's name at this point, for she has not yet been accepted into naval service.

Invitation. The following is a typical example of a launching invitation:

The Commander, Portsmouth Naval Shipyard
requests the honor of your presence
at the launching of the submarine
DEEP FISH (SS 999)
on Saturday, the twenty-first of July
two thousand and one⁵
at half past ten o'clock
at Portsmouth, New Hampshire
Mrs. Robert Thomas Williams, Sponsor⁶

R.S.V.P.

⁵ Indication of the year is optional.

⁶ Sponsors are generally prominent women of the community who, during the ceremony, name the vessel and break a bottle of wine against the ship's bow as the ship slides into the water.

Program. The following elements constitute most launching programs, although the sequence of events and participants can be altered:

National Anthem	
Welcome	<i>Shipyards official</i>
Introduction of Principal Speaker	<i>Senior Navy Official (i.e., Fleet Commander, Type Commander)</i>
Address	<i>Principal Speaker</i>
Invocation	<i>Chaplain</i>
Introduction of the Ship's Sponsor (and matrons of honor)	<i>Shipyards official or Senior Navy Official</i>
Christening	<i>Sponsor</i>

A common variation and elaboration of these parts is found in the ensuing example:

Attention sounded	
Opening remarks	<i>Senior Navy Official (i.e., Fleet Commander, Type Commander)</i>
Address on the ship's namesake and history of former ships of the name	<i>Guest Speaker</i>
Attention sounded	
Introduction of the sponsor, matron of honor, and representative of the Society of Sponsors	<i>Senior Navy Official or other speaker</i>
Presentation of gift from Navy yard employees ⁷	
Attention sounded	
Invocation	<i>Chaplain</i>
Christening	<i>Sponsor</i>
Anchors Aweigh	
National Anthem	

COMMISSIONING CEREMONY

The third and most important ceremony in the history of a ship admits her to the U.S. Navy. The essence of the ceremony is her acceptance by the Navy, entitling her thereafter to fly the commission pennant and to be designated a U.S. Ship.

There are two major steps in the commissioning process. Initially, the builder turns the ship over to the senior Navy official. The latter, who is the intermediary between builder and prospective commanding officer, receives the ship and commissions her. The Navy official then turns the ship over to the prospective commanding officer who accepts her, assumes command, and proceeds to act as host for the remainder of the ceremony.

⁷ Presentation of a gift to the sponsor may instead be made at the reception that follows the ceremony.

Invitation. There are two forms which commissioning invitations commonly take. The principal difference between lies in the consideration of who is the host for the ceremony and in whose name, therefore, invitations are extended. In practice, the first portion of the ceremony, including the commissioning itself, is the responsibility of the senior Navy official (i.e., Fleet Commander, Type Commander, etc.).

For this reason, invitations citing the senior Navy official as one of multiple hosts are often used; however, those tendered in the name of the commanding officer, officers and men are the least equally traditional.

Although acceptance as a U.S. Ship does not occur until midway in the ceremony, invitations customarily use the designation USS (without periods) with the ship's name.

The invitation may be engraved on full size, heavy white paper, similar in style to a wedding invitation, or as is more usual, on a white invitation card which is entirely plain or topped with a replica of the commission pennant.

Example 1:

The Commander, Naval Surface Force, U.S. Atlantic Fleet
The Commanding Officer and Ship's Company⁸
request the honor of your presence
at the commissioning of⁹
USS NEVERSAIL (DD 2215)
at the Norfolk, Naval Shipyard, Norfolk, Virginia
on Monday, the fifteenth of August
two thousand and one
at half-past one o'clock

R.S.V.P.
(757) 255-5812

Example 2:

The Captain, Officers and Crew of
UNITED STATES SHIP NEVERSAIL
request the honor of your presence
on the occasion of the commissioning of
UNITED STATES SHIP NEVERSAIL
Boston Naval Shipyard, Boston, Massachusetts
on Saturday, the tenth of May
two thousand and one
at three o'clock

Please present this card
At the Henley Street Gate

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⁸ The "Commanding Officer, Officers and Crew" is an acceptable alternate second line. It is unnecessarily exclusive to extend the invitation to the ceremony in the name of only the "Commanding Officer and Officers," as it is sometimes done.

⁹ It is incorrect to use the definite article before a ship's name inasmuch as there is but one of the name in commission at any given time.

¹⁰ The desired uniform may be specified here, or such other information as "Cameras not permitted."

Program. An annotated sample program for commissioning is shown below:

Band selections	
Invocation	<i>Chaplain</i>
Welcome and introduction of the	
Senior Navy Official	<i>Builder or Shipyard Commander</i>
Introduction of distinguished guests	<i>Senior Navy Official</i>
Reading of commissioning directive	<i>Senior Navy Official</i>
Ship commissioning	<i>Senior Navy Official</i>
Raising of Colors, Union Jack and	
Commissioning Pennant	
National Anthem	
Acceptance of command, reading of orders	
and assumption of command	<i>Commanding Officer</i>
Setting the watch	<i>Commanding Officer and</i>
	<i>Executive Officer</i>
Rendering of honors/personal flag of	
VIP/SOP broken	<i>Commanding Officer orders</i>
Introduction of Principal Speaker	<i>Commanding Officer</i>
Address	<i>Principal Speaker</i>
Remarks	<i>Commanding Officer</i>
Presentation of gift(s) ¹¹	
Benediction	<i>Chaplain</i>
Band selections	

DECOMMISSIONING CEREMONY

Still another ceremony terminates the active naval service of ships other than those lost at sea. A decommissioning is generally a somber occasion and far less elaborate than any of the others discussed here.

Program. The main parts of the ceremony that are again subject to reordering are:

Arrival honors (if appropriate)	
National Anthem	
Invocation	<i>Chaplain</i>
Introduction	<i>Commanding Officer</i>
Remarks (such as resumé of ship's history)	<i>Commanding Officer or</i>
	<i>other speaker</i>
Reading of orders	<i>Commanding Officer</i>
Remarks	<i>Authority accepting custody</i>
Decommissioning and relinquishment	
of command	<i>Commanding Officer</i>
Benediction	<i>Chaplain</i>

¹¹ At this point in the ceremony, gifts are often presented to the ship by the sponsor, by state, city or community officials, or by the shipbuilder.

An abbreviated ceremony that varies slightly from the foregoing is as follows:

Arrival honors (if appropriate)	
Invocation	<i>Chaplain</i>
Introduction and remarks (orders read)	<i>Commanding Officer</i>
National Anthem	
Colors lowered	
Transfer to the Reserve Fleet	<i>Authority accepting custody</i>